

One South or Many?

Plantation Belt and Upcountry in Civil War–Era Tennessee

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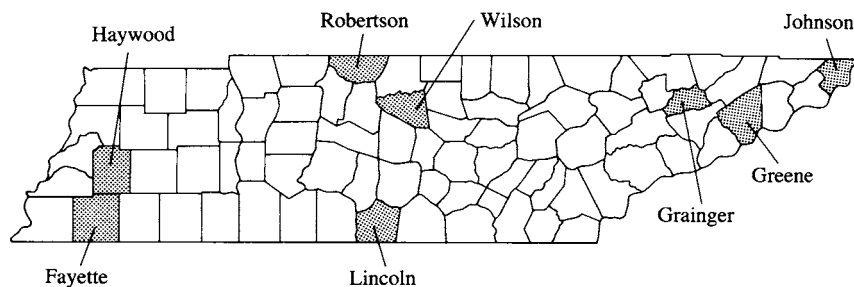
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Introduction

The internal diversity of the nineteenth-century South is simultaneously one of the most widely invoked and least explored themes in southern history. Whereas earlier generations were content to focus chiefly on the Black Belt and then extrapolate their findings to the entire South, since the 1970s scholars have been increasingly uncomfortable with such an approach, recognizing that it might exaggerate regional uniformity and lead to a distorted understanding of small-farm sections.¹ The result, first manifested extensively during the 1980s, has been a marked interest in the social and economic development of areas outside of the Black Belt, most notably the Upcountry areas of Georgia and South Carolina and the remote recesses of southern Appalachia.² Despite such recent work, however, our understanding of the socioeconomic bases of southern internal diversity is still primarily impressionistic. Like blind men groping an elephant, scholars

1. See, for example, Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," *Agricultural History* 49 (1975):331–42; Edward Pessen, "How Different from Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?", *American Historical Review* 85 (1980):1119–49.
2. Primary examples include Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeomen Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); David F. Weiman, "Petty Commodity Production in the Cotton South: Upcountry Farmers in the Georgia Cotton Economy, 1840–1880" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1983); Lacy K. Ford, *The Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982); John Inscow, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); and Robert D. Mitchell, ed., *Appalachian Frontiers: Settlement, Society, and Development in the Preindustrial Era* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991).



Sample Tennessee counties, 1860

have begun to describe different parts of the whole but as yet have no systematic basis for comparing them. Although scholars now frequently maintain that plantation and nonplantation areas differed in social and economic structure, explicitly comparative studies that explore such differences are rare.

In this book I have attempted to fashion such an explicitly comparative study by investigating and measuring the diversity of social and economic structure among rural Tennesseans during the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Perhaps no other state exhibited greater agricultural diversity on the eve of the Civil War than did Tennessee. As a federal report observed, “the length of the state . . . gives to the state its most prominent characteristic, to wit, great variety. This is seen,” the report elaborated, “in its topography, geology, soil, climate, agriculture, and we may say in the character and habits of its population.”³ Although there are in actuality eight distinct geological regions within the state, for purposes of analysis the study will concentrate on the state’s three “grand divisions,” East, Middle, and West Tennessee. Not only is this approach practically simpler, but it also conforms to Tennesseans’ own traditional views regarding the diversity of their state. Popular perceptions regarding its tripartite character are reflected in the three stars on the state flag and, until recently, in highway signs welcoming visitors to “the three states of Tennessee.”⁴

To reduce the task to manageable proportions, I have focused particularly on the farm populations of eight counties. These eight counties are

3. Eugene W. Hilgard [Special Agent], *Report on Cotton Production in the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1884), p. 383.

4. Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, 2d ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), pp. 3–5; Paul H. Bergeron, *Paths of the Past: Tennessee, 1770–1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), pp. 3–4.

shaded in gray on the map on page 2. Three of the counties selected for intensive analysis – Johnson, Greene, and Grainger – lie in the easternmost section of the state. The first white settlers entered upper East Tennessee – then part of the colony of North Carolina – at the end of the 1760s in defiance of the British Proclamation Line banning settlement west of the Appalachians. Typically following the Holston or French Broad rivers from Virginia or western North Carolina, settlers who entered the area found a region characterized by a succession of heavily wooded mountain ridges interspersed with narrow, generally fertile mountain valleys – “the Switzerland of America,” in the words of local boosters.⁵

The southern Appalachians, known also as the Smoky Mountains, run along the border between Tennessee and North Carolina at an average elevation of 5,000 feet. Situated in the extreme northeastern tip of the state along this border, Johnson County, the first eastern county to be studied, is essentially a mountain county. Its cultivable portion consists of a long, straight valley running northeast to southwest that is bounded by Iron and Stone mountains. The valley, known as Johnson County Cove, is approximately thirty miles long and three to four miles across at its widest point, and it has an average elevation of about 2,000 feet. As the state’s Commissioner of Agriculture observed of the cove in the 1870s, agriculturally “it is Johnson County.”⁶

The mountain farmers of Johnson County were probably as close to total isolation from the surrounding region as it was possible to be in the nineteenth-century South. The county had a few tolerably good roads but no macadamized turnpikes. No railroad penetrated the county until the mid-1890s.⁷ To enter or leave the cove it was necessary either to climb over the surrounding mountains or to pass through one of the narrow gaps cut through by mountain streams. To a considerable extent these obstacles effectively prevented involvement in a larger regional economy. The coun-

5. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, pp. 43–51; Hermann Bokum, *The Tennessee Handbook and Immigrants’ Guide* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., Publishers, 1868), p. 8.
6. Joseph Buckner Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee* (Nashville, TN: Tavel, Eastman, & Howell, 1874; reprint ed., Spartanburg, SC: The Reprint Company, 1974), p. 543, emphasis added. See also *Goodspeed History of Tennessee* (Nashville: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887), pt. 2, p. 922; Hilgard, *Report on Cotton Production*, p. 411; James M. Safford, *Geology of Tennessee* (Nashville, TN: S. C. Mercer, 1869), pp. 49–50.
7. William H. Nichols, “Some Foundations of Economic Development in the Upper East Tennessee Valley, 1850–1900,” *Journal of Political Economy* 64 (1956):277–302.

ty's mountain farmers concentrated on livestock grazing and also grew corn, wheat, and oats, primarily for local consumption.

To the west of Johnson County lies the prosperous Valley of East Tennessee, so called because it is framed on the east by the Smokies and on the west by the Cumberland Tableland, a massive plateau approximately 2,000 feet above sea level. In the nineteenth century the East Tennessee Valley was one of the most prominent small-farm regions of the Upper South. The soil is generally quite fertile, and it is well suited to the production of most cereals and grasses. As a census official described the region in the 1880s, it was "the poor man's rich land."⁸

Grainger County lies wholly within the Valley, as does Greene, with the exception of a three- to six-mile strip of mountain land on its southeastern border. During the 1850s the East Tennessee Valley rivaled the Shenandoah as the breadbasket of the South; accordingly, farmers in both counties concentrated heavily on wheat as well as on corn and livestock. In each county farmers were limited by a lack of good roads but were reasonably well served by tributaries of the Tennessee River – the Clinch, Holston, and Nolichucky rivers. None of these was adequate for reliable steamboat navigation, but farmers used them to transport large quantities of produce by flatboat to the Tennessee River, and via the Tennessee to Knoxville, the leading agricultural market in the region. In addition, the completion in 1858 of the East Tennessee and Virginia Railroad directly connected farmers in Greene County not only with Knoxville but with Chattanooga, Atlanta, and the Deep South.⁹

None of the eastern counties depended significantly on slave labor for the production of agricultural goods; in East Tennessee as a whole slaves constituted but 8 percent of the population. This was not due primarily to any principled public opposition to the "peculiar institution." A small but vocal abolition movement did develop in the region – one of the earliest antislavery newspapers in the country was published in Greene County – but in East Tennessee as throughout the South the strength of antislavery sentiment peaked by the late 1820s and was virtually extinct by the following decade.¹⁰ Rather, the relatively slight contribution of slave labor was

8. Hilgard, *Report on Cotton Production*, p. 410.

9. Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 276–86, 487–500; *Good-speed History of Tennessee*, p. 881; Nichols, "Some Foundations of Economic Development," p. 284.

10. The newspaper was Benjamin Lundy's *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, published in Greeneville between 1822 and 1824. See Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, pp. 215–17.

determined chiefly by the area's topography, soil, and climate, which precluded the successful cultivation of any of the South's most profitable staples: cotton, sugar, or tobacco. Forced to bid for slaves against planters and farmers who reaped large profits from these crops, most would-be slaveowners in East Tennessee depended on free labor instead. In the sampled eastern counties only one in ten farmers was a master as well.

Because of the obstacles to large-scale commercial agriculture in East Tennessee, the predominant flow of migration into the state began to bypass the region by the early nineteenth century. White migrants had begun to settle in Middle Tennessee as early as the 1780s, and within a few decades the region had surpassed the eastern section of the state in population, wealth, and political influence. Geographically, the region features the gently undulating Central Basin, which is surrounded on all sides by the Highland Rim averaging 1,000 feet above sea level. Agriculturally, the area was distinguished before the Civil War by the great variety of its crops and by the fine quality of its livestock. Famous for its horses, sheep, and mules, the area, as the state's commissioner of agriculture claimed with only mild hyperbole, "probably [had] as much fine stock as all the cotton states put together." Although the northernmost line of feasible cotton production ran through the region, few Middle Tennesseans planted the crop during the antebellum period. At the same time, however, a significant proportion did rely on the labor of black slaves, who constituted more than one-fifth of the section's population; in the three counties sampled from the area more than one-third of white farmers owned slaves. Taken together, these traits made Middle Tennessee a rarity in the antebellum South – an area committed simultaneously both to slave labor and to the extensive production of *foodstuffs* for the market.¹¹

The first of the three counties sampled from the region, Wilson County, lies wholly within the Central Basin, "the Garden of Tennessee." Its clay and lime-based soil was admirably suited to the production of corn, wheat, and oats, and the grasses of its uplands and hills made excellent pasturage for livestock. A well-developed series of macadamized roads, as well as access via the Cumberland River to nearby Nashville and the railroad network that centered there, provided Wilson County farmers with convenient links to external markets.¹²

11. Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 2–3, 619–24; Stephen V. Ash, *Middle Tennessee Society Transformed, 1860–1870: War and Peace in the Upper South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 2–12.

12. In addition, Wilson County was connected to Nashville by rail in 1871 when the

The second county, Lincoln, is situated approximately sixty miles to the southwest along the Alabama border. About two-thirds of the county lies within the Central Basin; much like Wilson County, this part of Lincoln County is marked by extremely fertile valleys broken by wooded hills and ridges. The remaining third, an eight-mile strip along its southern boundary, more properly belongs to the Highland Rim and contains soil of poorer quality. Although more likely to grow cotton than farmers farther north, Lincoln County farmers, like Middle Tennesseans generally, focused primarily on corn, wheat, and livestock. They were well connected to regional markets by the Elk River, which bisected the county before emptying into the Tennessee, and by a branch of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, which provided access to East Tennessee and the Lower South.¹³

The final Middle Tennessee county, Robertson, lies seventy-five miles due north of Lincoln County within the northern Highland Rim along the Tennessee–Kentucky border. Although not quite so fertile as the soils of the Central Basin, Robertson's lands dependably produced large crops of corn, oats, wheat, and tobacco throughout the antebellum period. No major navigable river runs through the county, but the county was connected to Nashville during the 1850s by the Edgefield and Kentucky Railroad.¹⁴

The economy of Middle Tennessee had already reached a fairly advanced state of development by the time the first white settlers were beginning to penetrate the westernmost section of the state. Defined as the area stretching between the Mississippi River and the western course of the Tennessee, West Tennessee, or the Western District as it was then known, was occupied exclusively by the Chickasaw Indian Nation until 1819, at which time the state secured title by treaty. The bulk of the region consists of a relatively flat, broad plain that slopes gently toward the alluvial lands along the banks of the Mississippi. Although farmers in the northern half of the region concentrated on corn, tobacco, and livestock production, farmers in the southwestern corner of the state quickly settled on cotton as the predominant staple; by midcentury the region was producing four-fifths of the

Tennessee and Pacific Railroad was completed as far as Lebanon, the county seat. See Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 1004–12; *Goodspeed History of Tennessee*, p. 345.

13. Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 799–807; Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, p. 204.

14. Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 890–900.

state's cotton crop and had emerged as one of the leading cotton-producing sections in the Upper South.¹⁵

Fayette and Haywood, the two western counties selected for analysis, lie adjacent to each other in this latter section. The soil of both counties belongs to the Brown Loam Tablelands, a belt of soil that runs far into Mississippi and that sustained the production of some of the finest Mississippi Upland cotton. It is no accident, then, that their agricultural economies more closely resembled that of northern Mississippi than of the remainder of Tennessee. Approximately nine out of ten farm operators in the counties planted cotton; fully eight out of ten also owned slaves, who constituted two-thirds of the population. The devotion of Haywood and Fayette farmers to the cotton and slave economy was strengthened by their proximity to Memphis, which had emerged by the late antebellum period as the leading inland cotton center of the South. Although roads in both counties were uniformly poor, river and rail alternatives were plentiful. Haywood's farmers had access to the city via the Hatchie and Forked Deer rivers and, after the mid-1850s, by the Memphis and Ohio Railroad. No major river connected Fayette to Memphis, but two railroads traversed the county en route to the city (the Memphis and Ohio and the Memphis and Charleston), and it is literally true that every farm in the county lay within a few miles of one or the other.¹⁶

In sum, the eight counties that I have selected for analysis varied significantly on the eve of the Civil War, most notably with regard to the twin elements that have come to define the antebellum southern economy in the popular mind: slavery and cotton. Without anticipating unduly the conclusions of such a comparison, it might be worthwhile at this point to consider briefly the potential benefits of comparing the farm populations of such disparate areas. Specifically:

1. What major historical themes should be illuminated?
2. What types of insight with regard to these themes might reasonably be expected?
3. To what degree should such insights be broadly applicable to the South as a whole?

The preeminent theme of interest is so obvious that I repeat it at the risk of redundancy: From beginning to end, the analysis to follow is designed

15. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, pp. 228–9; Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 1014–22.

16. Hilgard, *Report on Cotton Production*, p. 391; *Goodspeed History of Tennessee*, p. 346; Killebrew, *Introduction to the Resources of Tennessee*, pp. 1062–8.

explicitly to investigate the nature and extent of interregional diversity in the nineteenth-century South. If, however, the past is truly a “seamless web” – and I believe that it is – and interregional diversity was of crucial significance to the nineteenth-century South – and I believe that it was – then the question of interregional diversity should intersect with other issues of historical importance for the region. In particular, any advance in knowledge with regard to the South’s heterogeneity should also affect our understanding of the region’s extent of distinctiveness and discontinuity, questions that have divided scholars for decades.¹⁷ A narrow focus that ignored such interrelationships would be a product of choice, not necessity.

I must make clear at the outset that I have consciously made such a choice by determining to address one but not both of these inextricably related questions. Focusing on the years both immediately before and after the Civil War, this study confronts squarely the issue of discontinuity between the Old and the New South; some of the work’s most valuable insights pertain directly to the question. Both Souths were agriculturally and socioeconomically variegated, and a more informed recognition of this fact greatly facilitates the evaluation of change over time. I have resolved to remain silent, on the other hand, concerning the implications of my findings for the debate over southern distinctiveness. With due appreciation for the high quality of much that has been written on the subject, I remain convinced that the current debate is fueled most of all by theoretical and ideological differences and would be little affected by the empirical evidence I might offer.

With regard to the latter two questions – that is, the kinds of insights to be expected and their broader applicability – two attributes of the study are of crucial importance. The first concerns the nature of the evidence that it employs. With rare exceptions – the occasional diary or account book of the wealthy planter – nineteenth-century farmers left no intimate artifacts for the twentieth-century historian. Thus, although the analysis takes into account traditional forms of evidence whenever possible – plantation accounts, reports of Freedmen’s Bureau agents, reminiscences of Tennessee veterans – the bulk of the evidence is *quantitative*: impersonal

17. For the most recent historiographical treatments of these themes, see John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen, eds., *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), in particular the essays by Drew Gilpin Faust, “The Peculiar South Revisited: White Society, Culture, and Politics in the Antebellum Period, 1800–1860,” pp. 78–119; and Harold Woodman, “Economic Reconstruction and the Rise of the New South, 1865–1900,” pp. 254–307.

numerical data on landownership and crop production patterns drawn from federal and local records. This single factor unavoidably constrains the range of issues to be examined, although not as severely as would be indicated by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s famous dictum, "almost all important questions . . . are *not* susceptible to quantitative answers."¹⁸ One may reject Schlesinger's declaration as extreme (and more than a little defensive) while still recognizing that all historians must labor with evidence that is invariably imperfect and incomplete, and that wise scholars work within the limitations of their sources.

Keeping in mind the character of the evidence will enable the reader to understand better the focus of the analysis that follows. It concentrates on the distribution of land and slaves more than on perceptions of class consciousness, stresses patterns of wealth accumulation more than attitudes regarding social mobility, emphasizes the extent of market involvement more than individual feelings concerning economic independence or profit maximization. In short, it pays closer attention to structure and behavior than to consciousness, or *mentalité*. This is a relative generalization only, however. Although focusing on the structural and behavioral characteristics of the farm population, the study does not back away from the often glaring implications concerning the perception and motive of individual farmers. The local structure of wealthholding is, after all, the economic foundation of social consciousness, and behavior – the "only language that rarely lies"¹⁹ – constitutes the most reliable interpreter of *mentalité* available to the historian of the nonelite.

In addition to the nature of the evidence, a second important attribute of the analysis concerns its research design. This is a *case study* or, more properly, a series of case studies. Authors of case studies typically feel great pressure to demonstrate the representativeness of their subjects and the broader significance of their findings. Neither editorial boards nor tenure review committees – nor the reading public, for that matter – are impressed by the intense examination of obviously idiosyncratic subjects. The understandable temptation, then, is for authors to overstate their case, to assert that some particular community or individual or organization was in actuality a perfect miniature of some larger historical universe. In this in-

18. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Humanist Looks at Empirical Social Research," *American Sociological Review* 27 (1962):768–71, emphasis in the original.

19. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Penguin ed., New York, 1982), quoted in John Patrick Diggins, "Comrades and Citizens: New Mythologies in American Historiography," *American Historical Review* 90 (1985):647.

stance, for example, it is tempting to maintain that the eight counties to be investigated were a microcosm of Tennessee and that Tennessee, which contained “nearly all the important physical and geological features of the states around it,” was a microcosm of “the South.”²⁰

Neither claim will stand up, unfortunately. The first is rigorously unprovable; the sample counties do not represent Civil War-era Tennessee in any statistically verifiable sense. The second is logically indefensible, resting as it does on a denial of the internal diversity that the study is designed to explore. At bottom, any findings must resemble those of case studies generally – that is, they will be suggestive rather than conclusive. Even so, although a microcosm neither of the South nor of Tennessee alone, the sample counties – which stretched across 400 miles from the Appalachians to the Mississippi – did reflect vividly the heterogeneity that was a hallmark both of the state and of the South as a whole during the nineteenth century. As such, they constitute a fruitful proving ground on which to test several of the rather facile, frequently unsubstantiated assumptions now extant concerning southern diversity. The goal, then, is to challenge those generalizations, to stimulate other scholars to rethink and reformulate their conceptions of Black Belt and Upcountry, and in so doing to arrive at a fuller understanding of the many Souths of the Civil War era.

20. Hilgard, *Report on Cotton Production*, p. 383.